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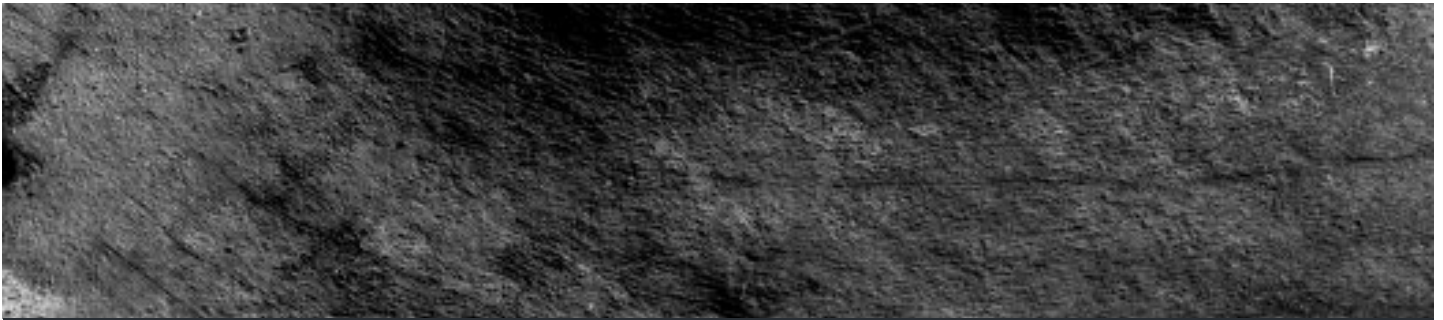


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Burnswark Hill Roman camps and a  
Prehistoric hillfort – Ecclefechan,  
Dumfries and Galloway





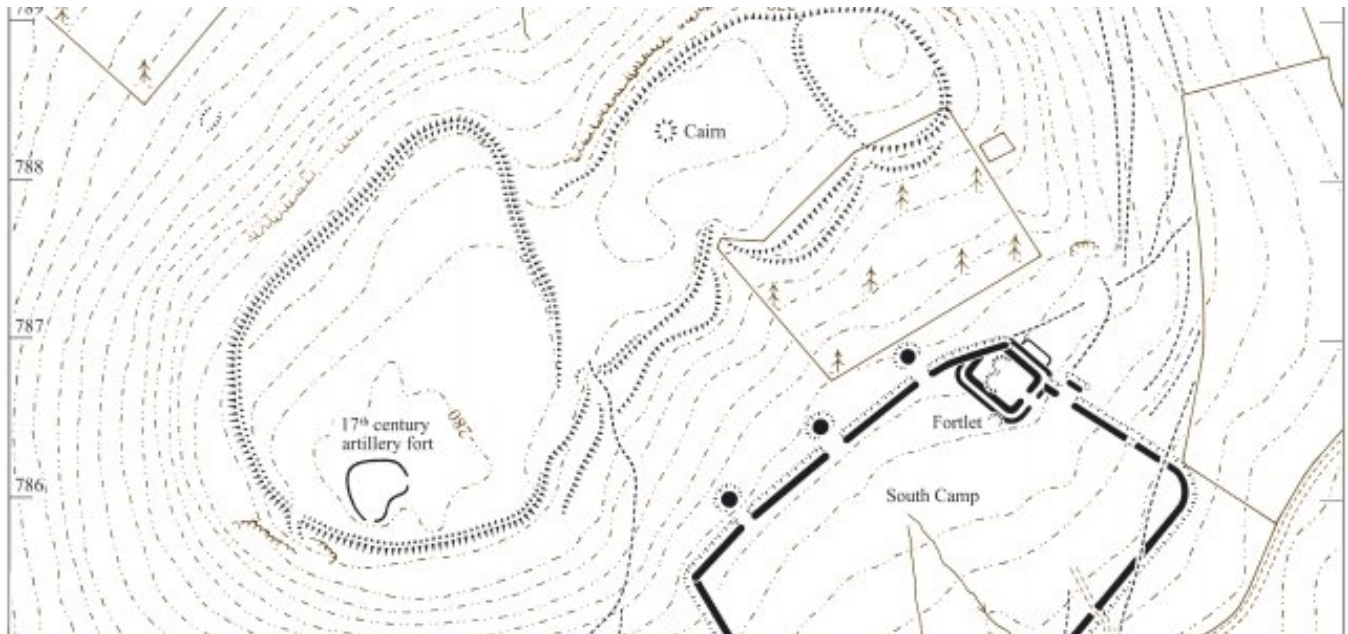
## The Burnswark Enigma

*From a distance, the appearance of the great flat-topped eminence of Burnswark Hill is striking. Lying approximately twenty miles north of the western end of Hadrian's Wall and with its summit at almost 1000 ft it is easily seen from most of the Solway basin. The upstanding archaeological complex is even more impressive, consisting of a seventeen acre (6.88ha.) late prehistoric fort, the largest hillfort in Dumfriesshire, locked in the grip of two highly unusual Roman camps: a 12 acre (4.86ha) sub-rectangular structure to the south and an extraordinarily elongated 6 acre (2.43ha) camp to the north. In the landscape around the site there is a rich backdrop of enclosed settlements, Bronze Age cairns, as well as Roman roads, and later medieval and post-medieval farms and farming activities. From the air, the south Roman camp and associated features such as the fortlet, and the three supposed ballista platforms, and the other Roman camp to the north, one imagines an undocumented siege of the prehistoric fort.*

*The arrangement of Roman camps and prehistoric forts, unique in Britain, is so distinctive that it has drawn the attention of antiquarians and archaeologists alike for at least the last three centuries. Previous commentators and excavators read like a list of the great and the good in Roman archaeology in Britain, including Roy, Haverfield, Schulten, Macdonald, Collingwood, Birley, St Joseph, Richmond, Jobey, Keppie and Breeze. There have been two previous notable digs, the first in 1898 by Barbour on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the second in the 1960s by George Jobey. However, immediately prior to Jobey's investigations in the 1960s there arose a speculative theory that seemed to counter the intuitive assessment of previous scholars who had identified the site as one of major conflict.*

*The originator of the new theory, Kenneth Steer, the then secretary to the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments of Scotland, was no lightweight pundit. Recently returned from a role as a real-life 'Monuments Man' in the British Army, he postulated that the camps were a training facility; in essence an elaborate firing range for Roman troops to practice their artillery and other ballistic weapons. Steer's desire perhaps to confirm the reported rigour of Roman army training, saw this as an explanation for the profusion of in-situ missiles on the site (lead sling bullets, iron arrowheads and stone ballista balls) and the apparently slighted nature of the hillfort's rampart. Jobey's excavations of the hillfort defences appeared to support Steer's theory by identifying numbers of leaden slingshot within the gateways, the suggested position of temporary Roman 'targets'. This theory gathered momentum particularly with those who saw the Romans as the only significant force in the area (obviating the need for conflict) and it consequently entered popular literature as fact. However, Steer's suggestion has not gone completely unchallenged. Three more recent observers, Keppie, Campbell and Hodgson, have subsequently reinterpreted the site as one of an actual conflict. The data from previous invasive investigations however has been sufficiently limited and ambiguous for it to be read either way, so much so that a recent comprehensive review by David Breeze in 2011 has painted a finely balanced picture.*





## Recent investigations

*It was therefore decided to approach this enigma using more modern remote sensing and analytical technology unavailable to early investigators. For the last three years, an HLF funded community archaeology project led by the Trimontium Trust has utilised aerial imaging, geophysics, high resolution metal detecting and highly selective excavation to add further data to the discussion. This fieldwork has been supplemented by an unprecedented lead isotope analysis of the lead sling bullets recovered from the site during the previous and current excavations to determine the contemporaneity of the ballistic events. Results have been encouraging and nearly two thousand metal 'targets' have been non-invasively plotted. Selective trenching has confirmed very high concordance between detector identification and confirmed lead sling bullet positions. The overall impression is of a single massive missile storm (including sling bullets, stone ballista balls, conventional arrows and ballista bolts) across half a kilometre of the southern facing rampart of the hillfort.*

*The profusion, and more particularly the ballistic distribution of Roman missiles detected by the 2015/16 metal detecting survey and the correlation of finds from the 2015/16 excavations suggest that there was indeed a major assault on the summit of Burnswark Hill. But in response to what and when? So far we can only speculate as to why an assault technique was employed by the Romans when facing insurgents on the continent (particularly in Judea), and why it was being used with such vigour in north Britain when it appears not to have been required anywhere in the south. Were the Southern tribes a walkover? Was it a reprisal for some unrecorded attack on the nearby Wall in Hadrian's reign, or was it a blooding of Roman troops prior to Antoninus's major military incursion into Caledonia? Was it the modus operandi of an Imperial Governor recently returned from a posting to Judea? Only dating evidence from further fieldwork will help address the lacunae in this enigmatic period of the Roman occupation.*

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/66626/burnswark>  
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